

The First and Last Mile:

Rural communities' management of evolving
disaster risk and the implications for preparedness
in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)

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2019

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Jacob Thomson declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Doctor of Philosophy, in the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This thesis is the result of a research candidature conducted with another University as part of a collaborative Doctoral degree.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Date: 09/04/2019

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was conducted with the kind permission of Lao National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), and with the support and collaboration of the Savannakhet Provincial Agricultural and Forestry Office (PAFO) and the leadership structures and communities of the three villages that were its focus. As allowed by the research visa granted by the Government of Lao PDR (GoL), primary data collection was undertaken from April 2013 to February 2014, with a subsequent iteration later in 2014. In addition to NAFRI and PAFO, my genuine thanks are extended to the Lao and French Red Cross (Croix Rouge FRC) who provided initial information on the status of DRR operations and CRA frameworks within Lao PDR; and to the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation – Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (CSIRO-ACIAR) who provided financial assistance.

Clear and sincere thanks are extended to a core and extended supervisory team of: Associate Professor R. Plant; Professor P. Mukheibir; Associate Professor M. Paddon, of the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney; Dr T Prior, Centre for Security Studies, ETH Zurich; and Dr P. Brown, CSIRO. For discussion, critical engagement, and /or review of this thesis document, sincere thanks are extended to; Dr T. Jackson, Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR); Professor R. McGready, University of Oxford; Dr J. Lawler University of Sydney; Dr A. Smith, Foundation for Local Development; Associate Professor R. Coventry, Dr R. Congdon, Dr R. Huerlimann, and Mr. C. Gardiner, James Cook University; and my colleagues in the field and the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement.

Final and all important thanks are given to my family and friends without whom this thesis could never have been undertaken nor completed: RLT, MFH, AT, RT, TB, NA, MF, RB, SN, JJ, SC, SS, CA, SW, PW, YT, WT, SC, RW, RB, DC, JL, EO, & JT.

In memoriam

BFT

Prior components of this thesis have been presented at the following conferences:

Thomson, J., Plant, R., Mukheibir, P. (2018). Livelihoods of the last mile: a case study of how rural households in development contexts manage evolving disaster risk and the challenges for early warning of rural-urban migration. Conference proceedings: 8th International Conference on Building Resilience – ICBR Lisbon, PORTUGAL

Thomson, J., Plant, R., Prior, T., Mukheibir, P. (2015). Expanding our understanding of Early Warning Systems and the role of general system resilience. Conference proceedings: Australian-New Zealand Disaster & Emergency Management Conference, Gold Coast, AUSTRALIA

Thomson, J., Prior, T., Paddon, M., Plant, R. (2014). Resilience or transformation? A case study of environmental change, livelihood, & shifting disaster risk thresholds from within Lao PDR. Conference proceedings: Climate change & social impacts, Colombo, SRI LANKA

ABSTRACT

This research asks: *How can current Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategies in use by rural households in development contexts be practically improved for a future of evolving disaster risk?* This question is important because not only are losses to disaster increasing, but they continue to have a disproportional effect on the world's poor. But the same reasons that make improved DRR strategies important, also present clear challenges for disaster research and praxis.

For assessment, persistent limitations of DRR governance mean that **livelihoods** have been the principal means by which households have pursued self-reliance in the face of disaster. But rural livelihoods are complex and dynamic, incorporating diverse farm and non-farm resources and processes in response to both threats and opportunities. For anticipation, obstacles include significant uncertainty of all-hazards forecasting, and the ability to incorporate risk knowledge from, and disseminate warning to, the local level – the ‘first and last mile’

This research presents a case study of three villages in Lao PDR. A **systems** framework integrating the Disaster Resilience of Place conceptual model with established Community Risk Assessment indicators and methodology from DRR praxis, was used to structure enquiry implemented by an ethnographic, iterative case study methodology using Participatory Rural Appraisal tools.

It was found that cross-border trade, land encroachment, foreign-direct investment, mechanisation, and off-farm migration had resulted in higher incomes for some, but in many instances had combined with what the research identified as stochastic, increasingly transboundary, and potentially emergent **hazard dynamics** to place greater stress on the focal system. Respondents believed that a **threshold** may have been reached whereby in the event of a range of potential crises, traditional in situ DRR strategies may no longer be viable and that the best option may lie in outmigration.

The focal system was in a state of flux due to **complex feedback mechanisms** within and across national borders. This carried with it the potential for future systemic collapse that may lead to greater susceptibility and large-scale **displacement**. This has at least two implications for DRR programming. First, it questions established

programming based on **incremental adaptation in situ**. Second, it underscores the imperative and potential limitations to **improving the predictive capacity of early warning** for such complex and dynamic systems. These two approaches may remain the best means of improved, no-regrets DRR, but may still not be sufficient to hedge against future disaster risk that is **stochastic**, increasingly **transboundary**, and potentially **emergent**.

Keywords: disaster preparedness; livelihoods; displacement; stochastic; transboundary; emergent; system thresholds; early warning.

TABLE of CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	VI
TABLE OF FIGURES AND TABLES	X
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 RESEARCH RATIONALE	2
1.1.1 THE IMPACTS AND DISPARITIES OF GLOBAL DISASTER RISK	2
1.1.2 DISASTER RISK REDUCTION (DRR) AND NO-REGRETS STRATEGIES	3
1.1.3 THE FIRST AND LAST MILE AND THE RESEARCH CHALLENGE	6
1.2 RESEARCH ENQUIRY	8
1.2.1 AIM	8
1.2.2 APPROACH TO ENQUIRY	9
1.2.3 CONTRIBUTION	10
1.2.4 DOCUMENT STRUCTURE	11
2 BACKGROUND: REVIEW OF PRAXIS AND RESEARCH LITERATURE	14
2.1 UNDERSTANDING DISASTER RISK	16
2.1.1 A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR DISASTER RISK	16
2.1.2 THE CONTEXT – THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND LAO PDR	18
2.1.3 THE DRIVERS AND THE FEEDBACK – CLIMATE CHANGE, TRADE, AND DISPLACEMENT	24
2.1.4 SYSTEMIC RISK – HAZARDS, EXPOSURE, VULNERABILITY	26
2.1.5 CAPACITY – DRR GOVERNANCE AND LIVELIHOODS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH	30
2.2 ASSESSING AND ANTICIPATING DISASTER RISK	36
2.2.1 COMMUNITY RISK ASSESSMENT (CRA)	37
2.2.2 EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS (EWS)	40
2.2.3 RESILIENCE THINKING AND THE LIMITATIONS OF ANTICIPATING EVOLVING DISASTER RISK	43
2.3 ENQUIRY INTO LOCAL LEVEL DISASTER RISK	51
2.3.1 DISASTER RESILIENCE OF PLACE (DROP) + COMMUNITY RISK ASSESSMENT (CRA)	52
2.3.2 THE ADVANTAGES, LIMITATIONS, AND PROPOSED MODIFICATIONS TO THE DROP MODEL	53
2.3.3 THE DROP-CRA ENQUIRY FRAMEWORK	62
2.3.4 COMPONENT A: BASELINE AND SYSTEM BOUNDARIES	64

2.3.5	COMPONENT B: HAZARD DYNAMICS	69
2.3.6	COMPONENT C: CAPACITY (LONGER-TERM)	75
2.4	SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	76
3	METHODOLOGY	79
3.1	INTRODUCTION	79
3.1.1	THE STUDY LOCATION	81
3.1.2	SELECTION AND DE-IDENTIFICATION OF STUDY SITES AND PARTICIPANTS	82
3.2	RESEARCH DESIGN	84
3.2.1	APPROACH – ETHNOGRAPHY	84
3.2.2	STRUCTURE – CASE STUDY	85
3.2.3	TOOLS - PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL (PRA)	88
3.3	IMPLEMENTATION	90
3.3.1	OVERVIEW TO THE PHASED APPROACH IN LOCATION	90
3.3.2	PHASE I – INTRODUCTION, ORIENTATION AND OBSERVATION	91
3.3.3	PHASE II – FORMAL DATA COLLECTION	92
3.3.4	PHASE III – ITERATION AND REFINEMENT	94
3.3.5	METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION	96
3.4	CONTEXT AND LIMITATIONS	104
3.4.1	INFORMED CONSENT AND THE CONVEYANCE OF RESEARCH INTENT	104
3.4.2	ACCESS AND OBJECTIVITY	106
3.4.3	LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION	108
4	RESULTS: BASELINE AND SYSTEM BOUNDARIES	110
4.1	INTRODUCTION	110
4.2	FINDINGS	112
4.2.1	OVERVIEW TO THE STUDY LOCATION	112
4.2.2	EXPOSURE: LOCATION, LANDSCAPE AND INFRASTRUCTURE.	117
4.2.3	VULNERABILITY: DEMOGRAPHY, ASSETS AND ECONOMY, AND COMMUNITY SERVICES	123
4.2.4	ORGANISATION: LEADERSHIP, COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION, AND DRR INSTITUTIONS	127
4.3	DISCUSSION	136
4.3.1	BOUNDARIES OF THE FOCAL SYSTEM	136
4.3.2	COMPONENTS OF THE FOCAL SYSTEM	137

4.3.3	FORMAL DRR GOVERNANCE	140
4.4	CONCLUSION: BASELINE AND SYSTEM BOUNDARIES FOR THE FOCAL SYSTEM	142
5	RESULTS: HAZARD DYNAMICS	145
5.1	INTRODUCTION	145
5.2	FINDINGS	147
5.2.1	HAZARDS: THE EXPERIENCE OF HAZARD IMPACTS ACROSS THE FOCAL SYSTEM	147
5.2.2	RISK AWARENESS: COMMUNICATION AND EVALUATION OF THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES	154
5.2.3	RESPONSES: THE ASSETS AND PROCESSES EMPLOYED IN TIMES OF CRISIS	163
5.3	DISCUSSION	168
5.3.1	HAZARDS KNOWLEDGE	168
5.3.2	RISK AWARENESS	176
5.3.3	RESPONSES (SHORT TO MID-TERM)	181
5.3.4	SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS	187
5.4	CONCLUSION: HAZARD DYNAMICS OF THE FOCAL SYSTEM	194
6	RESULTS: LONGER-TERM CAPACITIES	200
6.1	INTRODUCTION	200
6.2	SUB-STUDY 1 – STOCHASTIC HAZARD DYNAMICS: VARIANCE BETWEEN SEASONS, HOUSEHOLDS, COMMUNITIES, AND LANDSCAPES	203
6.2.1	BASELINE COMMUNITY RISK ASSESSMENT (CRA) OF LIVELIHOOD PORTFOLIOS	203
6.2.2	INDIVIDUAL HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOOD PURSUITS	207
6.2.3	VILLAGE LANDSCAPES: SPATIOTEMPORAL VARIATIONS IN LIVELIHOOD CATEGORIES	212
6.2.4	INDIVIDUAL VILLAGE LANDSCAPE VARIATION	214
6.2.5	CONCLUSION	219
6.3	SUB-STUDY 2 – TRANSBOUNDARY HAZARD DYNAMICS: LIVELIHOODS THAT ENCOMPASS BOTH IN SITU AND EX SITU LOCATIONS	224
6.3.1	IN SITU AGRICULTURE: STRUCTURAL AND NON-STRUCTURAL APPROACHES TO RISK MANAGEMENT AND PRODUCTION CAPACITY	225
6.3.2	EX SITU MIGRATION: THE THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES ENCOUNTERED BY HIGHLY MOBILE POPULATIONS	232
6.3.3	CONCLUSION	247
6.4	SUB-STUDY 3 – EMERGENT HAZARD DYNAMICS: THE IMPACT OF OPEN BORDERS ON LIVELIHOODS AND LANDSCAPES	253

6.4.1	ENCROACHMENT THAT RESULTS IN EXTENDED AND FRAGMENTED SYSTEM BOUNDARIES	254
6.4.2	LIVESTOCK EXPORT AS MALADAPTATION OR JUST COMMON SENSE?	256
6.4.3	FEEDBACK BETWEEN LIVELIHOOD CATEGORIES THAT MAY AMPLIFY OR ATTENUATE IN SITU DISASTER RISK	259
6.4.4	CONCLUSION: THE ADAPTIVE CYCLE AND IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL SYSTEM THRESHOLDS	263
6.5	CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS: LONGER-TERM CAPACITIES	267
7	<u>SYNTHESIS & CONCLUSION: RISK, RESILIENCE, & ANTICIPATION</u>	<u>271</u>
7.1	INTRODUCTION	271
7.2	SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS	273
7.2.1	SFDRR 2015–2030 PRIORITY 1: UNDERSTANDING DISASTER RISK	273
7.2.2	SFDRR 2015–2030 PRIORITY 2: STRENGTHENING DISASTER RISK GOVERNANCE TO MANAGE DISASTER RISK	280
7.2.3	SFDRR 2015–2030 PRIORITY 3: INVESTING IN DISASTER RISK REDUCTION FOR RESILIENCE	282
7.2.4	SFDRR 2015–2030 PRIORITY 4: ENHANCING DISASTER PREPAREDNESS FOR EFFECTIVE RESPONSE AND TO ‘BUILD BACK BETTER’ IN RECOVERY, REHABILITATION AND RECONSTRUCTION	286
7.3	REFLECTION ON ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK	300
7.4	CONCLUSION	303
8	<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	<u>307</u>
9	<u>APPENDICES</u>	<u>348</u>
9.1	APPENDIX A - LOCATION LOGS	348
9.2	APPENDIX B - SURVEY, SECONDARY DATA, AND NOTATIONS	348

TABLE of FIGURES and TABLES

FIGURE 1: STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 1	2
FIGURE 2. STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 2	15
FIGURE 3. (A) THE IPCC CONCEPTUALISATION OF DISASTER RISK	16
FIGURE 4. THE RESEARCH CONCEPTUALISATION OF DISASTER RISK – ADAPTED FROM IPPC (2012).	17
FIGURE 5. ECONOMIC CORRIDORS AND TRANSPORTATION LINKS OF THE GREATER MEKONG SUB-REGION (GMS).	20
FIGURE 6. CLIMATE VULNERABILITY ACROSS SOUTHEAST ASIA.	20
FIGURE 7. THE DISASTER MANAGEMENT CYCLE	32
FIGURE 8. THE ADAPTIVE CYCLE.	49
FIGURE 9. ORIGINAL DISASTER RESILIENCE OF PLACE MODEL (DROP).	53
FIGURE 10. MODIFIED DISASTER RESILIENCE OF PLACE MODEL (DROP).	64
FIGURE 11. STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 3	79
FIGURE 12. APPROXIMATE LOCATION AND SCHEMATIC OF STUDY SITE LOCATIONS IN LAO PDR AND RELATIVE TO WIDER MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA.	81
FIGURE 13. WEATHER DATA FOR SAVANNAKHET AIRFIELD 1998-2013. SOURCE: DMH SAVANNAKHET, GOL, 2013.	82
FIGURE 14. PHASE I DATA COLLECTION	92
FIGURE 15. PHASE II DATA COLLECTION SCHEMATIC 19 & 55 & 30	93
FIGURE 16. SEASONAL CALENDAR WITH VILLAGE LEADERSHIP V2, MAY 2013	98
FIGURE 17. HOUSEHOLD SURVEY IN PARTICIPANT’S HOUSE, V3 AUGUST 2013.	98
FIGURE 18. SEASONAL CALENDAR WITH V1 FARMERS.	99
FIGURE 19. RICH PICTURE WITH V3 FARMERS.	99
FIGURE 20: STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 4	110
FIGURE 21. SCHEMATIC OF THE LANDSCAPE OF THE STUDY LOCATION	113
FIGURE 22. HOUSING CONSTRUCTION ACROSS THE STUDY LOCATION (V1–V3)	117
FIGURE 23. TRANSECT LANDSCAPE SCHEMATIC OF VILLAGE ONE (V1).	118
FIGURE 24. ACCESS TO VILLAGE ONE (V1).	119
FIGURE 25. COMPARATIVE VILLAGE WATER SYSTEMS, V1 AN V3.	120
FIGURE 26. TRANSECT LANDSCAPE SCHEMATIC OF VILLAGE TWO (V2).	121
FIGURE 27. TRANSECT LANDSCAPE SCHEMATIC OF VILLAGE THREE (V3)	122
FIGURE 28. V1 GOVERNANCE SCHEMATIC	128
FIGURE 29. V2 GOVERNANCE SCHEMATIC	129
FIGURE 30. V3 GOVERNANCE SCHEMATIC	131
FIGURE 31: STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 5	146
FIGURE 32. V1 HAZARD MAP	148
FIGURE 33. V2 HAZARD MAP	148
FIGURE 34. V3 HAZARD MAP	149
FIGURE 35. EXAMPLES OF INFORMATION SOURCES ACROSS THE STUDY SITES	157

FIGURE 36. RAINFALL DATA FOR SAVANNAKHET AIRFIELD 1998-2013	158
FIGURE 37. TEMPLE IN THE VICINITY OF V3 DESTROYED DURING THE INDOCHINA WAR.	170
FIGURE 38. THE RESERVOIRS IN THE VICINITY OF VILLAGES	173
FIGURE 39. ALL-HAZARDS DIAMOND – TOP SIX RANKED HAZARDS PLOTTED ON SPATIOTEMPORAL AXES	189
FIGURE 40. ASPECTS OF NESTED AND ESCALATING RESPONSE STRATEGIES	193
FIGURE 41: STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 6	202
FIGURE 42. SEASONAL VARIATION ON PADDY LAND IN VICINITY OF V2, 2013-2014	206
FIGURE 43. EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT LIVELIHOOD CATEGORIES ACROSS THE STUDY LOCATION.	207
FIGURE 44. SCHEMATICS OF SPATIOTEMPORAL LIVELIHOOD DISTRIBUTION (V1 - V3)	213
FIGURE 45. V1 LIVELIHOOD SCHEMATIC, 2013-14	214
FIGURE 46. V2 LIVELIHOOD SCHEMATIC, 2013-14	216
FIGURE 47. V3 LIVELIHOOD SCHEMATIC 2013-14	217
FIGURE 48. COMPARATIVE HOUSEHOLD PARTICIPATION IN RICE PRODUCTION.	225
FIGURE 49. CHANGES TO LOCAL RICE PRODUCTION.	228
FIGURE 50. HOUSEHOLD PARTICIPATION IN MIGRATION FROM ACROSS THE STUDY SITES.	232
FIGURE 51. LOCATIONS OF MIGRANT EMPLOYMENT	237
FIGURE 52. SCHEMATIC OF MIGRANT MOVEMENT WITHIN AND ACROSS BORDERS	241
FIGURE 53. HOUSEHOLD PARTICIPATION IN IN SITU LANDSCAPE-BASED LIVELIHOOD CATEGORIES.	253
FIGURE 54. THE LOSS OF NTFP AND THE EXPANSION INTO MARGINAL LANDS IN VICINITY OF V1	255
FIGURE 55. LIVESTOCK GRAZING IN THE VICINITY OF V3: WET AND DRY SEASONS	259
FIGURE 56. PLANTATIONS, LOGGING, AND CLEAR FELLING ACROSS THE STUDY LOCATION	263
FIGURE 57. NETWORK SCHEMATIC OF THE LIVELIHOOD, HAZARD AND RESPONSE CATEGORIES	265
FIGURE 58: STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 7	272
FIGURE 59. NETWORK SCHEMATIC OF THE LIVELIHOOD, HAZARD AND RESPONSE CATEGORIES	292
FIGURE 60. IN SITU, EX SITU, AND TRANSBOUNDARY SCALES OF ANALYSIS	292
FIGURE 61. TRANSBOUNDARY AND NETWORKED DISASTER RISK.	293
TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH ENQUIRY FRAMEWORK	78
TABLE 2. OVERVIEW TO THE STUDY VILLAGES (V1 – V3).	83
TABLE 3. PARTICIPANTS IN HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS AND ITERATIVE DISCUSSIONS	98
TABLE 4. MEETINGS AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD) RESPONDENTS	101

TABLE 5. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS	102
TABLE 6. OVERVIEW OF TO THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE STUDY LOCATION.	113
TABLE 7. COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY LOCATIONS	114
TABLE 8. TOP THREE LIVELIHOOD CATEGORIES AS RANKED BY HOUSEHOLDS ACROSS LOCATIONS AND SEASONS.	116
TABLE 9. SEASON CALENDAR AND THE ANNUAL DISTRIBUTION OF HAZARDS (V1 - V3)	150
TABLE 10. HISTORIC TIMELINE OF HAZARDS (V1 - V3).	151
TABLE 11. HAZARDS RANKED BY PARTICIPANTS ACCORDING TO PERCEIVED SEVERITY	152
TABLE 12. HAZARDS AND CONSTRAINTS ASSOCIATED WITH CROP PRODUCTION	153
TABLE 13. HOUSEHOLD SOURCES OF INFORMATION	155
TABLE 14. CHANGES IN SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON HAZARDS OVER TIME	157
TABLE 15. PAFO CLIMATE PERCEPTIONS AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT.	159
TABLE 16. HOUSEHOLD PERCEPTION OF RECENT CLIMATIC VARIATION	160
TABLE 17. HOUSEHOLD AND INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE OVER TIME (V1, V2, V3).	161
TABLE 18. RESPONDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF FUTURE CHANGES TO LANDSCAPES AND LIVELIHOODS	163
TABLE 19. CATEGORISATION OF RESPONSE STRATEGIES	165
TABLE 20. CHANGES TO HOUSEHOLD RESPONSE STRATEGIES	167
TABLE 21. TOP THREE LIVELIHOOD CATEGORIES AS RANKED BY HOUSEHOLDS ACROSS LOCATIONS AND SEASONS.	204
TABLE 22. INDIVIDUAL HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOOD VARIATION, V2.	208
TABLE 23. MIGRANT DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE	234